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A Century of Immigration

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The mid-twentieth century is a vantage point for the social historian concerned mainly with American immigrant history for the reason that he is already distant enough to see the pattern of the movement and close enough still to hear the accent of the individual. A quarter century has passed since the bars of the quota system were lowered across the wide archway into this country. This stopped immigration as a mass movement. The immigrants settled down. In some communities they set the pattern of social behavior. In others they mixed their customs with those of the culture that had preceded them. The changes they wrought and the contributions they made to America, as pioneer immigrants, belong to the past and thus to the historian, who can now study them as a group. On the other hand, there are still a few individuals who came in the waning tide of the movement. They are the primary sources of the record, giving it authenticity by adding the freshness of personal memory.

Thirty-five million people came into America during the century of immigration, 1820-1920. The Germans, six million of them, were the most numerous; close behind them were the Italians and the Irish, those from Austria-Hungary and Russia next. Following these in numerical order were peoples from England, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, and France. Broadly speaking, the immigrants from northern Europe, with the exception of the Irish, sought the land; those from southern and eastern Europe went to urban centers. The former, known as the "old immigration," were dominant up to 1890. The latter, or the "new immigration," formed the largest groups from 1890 until the adoption of the quota system.

The period of "old immigration" coincided with the opening of the Middle West. This region, where land was cheap and plentiful, where timber, streams, and meadowlands abounded, naturally became the destination of hundreds of thousands of these newcomers from northern Europe. This was evident as early as 1850, when the Swedish writer, Fredrika Bremer, traveled through America. "That great central valley of the continent of North America," she wrote, "already invites to its large bosom those masses of people who are pouring out from the overstocked communities of the Old World."

More interesting still, Miss Bremer noted the double culture, which was then in its early stages

but was to become a marked feature of Middle Western society. She observed that "although two-thirds of the population of the Mississippi Valley consists of Scandinavians, Germans, Irish, and French, yet there too is the legislative and formative spirit of the Anglo-Norman." To put it in another way: the superstructure or frame was certainly Anglo-Saxon, but below and within there was a strong immigrant subculture. Over fifty per cent of the population in many states of the Middle West in 1910 were first- and second-generation Americans. This fact cannot be disregarded if one is to understand the region and its place in the economic, social, and political scheme of the nation as a whole.

Did the immigrants, for example, contribute to the reputation the Middle West has for religious orthodoxy and political conservatism? Answering affirmatively one must remember first that the westward movement was a Protestant movement. The early settlers were farmers from New England and the middle states, many of whom "had drunk deep from the springs of Calvinism," as one historian of the West wrote, and Wesleyism, as we may add. Nowhere was "the revival" as widespread and flamboyant as in the Middle Border. (Hamlin Garland and Ed Howe are good witnesses.) Then came the sterner-voiced fundamentalism of thousands of vigorous, not to say pietistic, Protestant immigrants. The combination

left an indelible stamp on the character of the region.

Certain political traits, too, have been ascribed to the Middle Border. Almost unfailingly these states appear in the Republican column on election night. The causes are complex, but for our purpose only the major ones need to be mentioned. The West was opened primarily by people, both Americans and European-born, who disliked slavery. Protestant, they also believed in the fundamental equality of all human souls. Lincoln, a product of this frontier, a man of the people, drew them into and held them, even after his lifetime, in the Republican party. He was the personal symbol of the morality they lived by, of the ideals that inspired them. Even more important, in the Homestead Act of 1862 Lincoln and the Republican party promised the western settlers land. This cemented them more firmly in the party groove than anything else. Only during periods of economic depression and agrarian discontent did the voters of this region protest against their party, but after each excursion they returned.

The political sentiments in an immigrant community in the seventies and eighties have been well described in *The Log Book of a Young Immigrant* by Laurence M. Larson, a Norwegian-American who became president of the American Historical Association. Looking back on his boyhood in Winnebago County, Larson remembers

how the reading of Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Epes Sargent's *Peculiar Institution* "intensified an inborn and implacable hostility toward slavery" and how it "strengthened the bonds that held good men and women to the Republican party." As installments of Sargent's novel came week after week these immigrant men and women "learned to hate the Democratic party, which, they were told, had tried so hard to stem the wave of righteousness that had swept the party of freedom into power in 1860." In the two decades following the Civil War, wrote Larson, "the Democratic party, at least in northern Iowa, was not regarded as respectable." When the voters of the community showed some interest in Cleveland in the 1884 campaign an eloquent spokesman for the Republican cause, a Norwegian-American lawyer, rhetorically asked his audience, "Can you go to the Lord's table on Sunday and vote for Cleveland on Tuesday?"

For many immigrant families the Republican cloak was as unchangeable as their Lutheranism, Methodism, or Presbyterianism, a cloak which descended to their sons and daughters, many of whom remained either on the land or in a rural village of the region, thereby maintaining almost unbroken the pattern of living and thinking established by their parents.

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